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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the implications of self efficacy beliefs on the career planning process among emerging adults in the 17-20 age bracket who have had limited life experiences. An objective for the coursework in personal and career exploration was to expose students, new to the college experience, to methods for identifying and achieving successful academic and career goals. Throughout such courses, numerous tasks and exercises expect identification with self and future self-schemas. By improving the methodology of validating life experiences, the researchers are attempting to show that self efficacy can be positively influenced, leading to a boost in self efficacy that can contribute to improved goal setting and goal attainment. (JDM)

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Improving Career Self-Efficacy in Emerging Adults with Limited Life Experiences

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Introduction

At one time, the answer to the question of career choice was a life long answer, or one that spanned at least twenty or thirty years. While we no longer expect to have long-term answers for careers like our parents or grandparents did, we often ask the same questions to the emerging adult population in the 17 to 20 age bracket: "What will you do five years from now as a career? What exactly would you like to do with your education?" The misleading notion in this line of questioning is that it implies the answer will have long-term assurance when, in fact, career plans fluctuate due to the variables that students encounter during the choice experience. Age, maturity, value shifts, demographics, lifestyle and economic cycles can shape a decision and reshape it within months, if not weeks, of the last known declaration. Another dilemma in asking these questions of emerging adults is that, among this age group, limited life experiences can impose limited thinking and inhibit the career selection experience due in part to low self-efficacy.

For individuals with limited life experiences, such as little or no work experience, the task of making career decisions can be difficult. A critical factor in the decision making process is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that one can set goals and achieve them, overcome odds and setbacks, and execute the task of making a career decision despite the limitations of a future with many unknown variables. Bandura (1977) calls this ability to overcome perceived barriers "coping efficacy."

The authors of this article have submitted a request to the Institutional Review Board at California State University, Long Beach to conduct research on the self-efficacy beliefs of students in career planning classes in the Fall of 2001, and will report the status of their research at the International Career Development Conference in November, 2001 in Seattle, Washington.

Career and Personal Exploration Classes

Three lecturers teaching Personal and Career Exploration classes at California State University, Long Beach discussed how to develop better methods of presenting and processing career related information to students in a university course, and to evaluate whether these changes decreased student's indecision regarding careers and majors. Because the content of the course has been

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certified by the institution as meeting the requirements for a General Education Self-Integration course, the researchers wanted to introduce methods that would enhance the value of the course, without adding another assignment to the already comprehensive course outline. For example, students take a battery of assessments including Locus of Control, Learning Difficulties, Study Skills, Cognitive Styles and Work Values; develop an Education Plan, and 3 months of Study Management Schedules; attend workshops from the Learning Assistance Center to improve study skills, and write four integration papers. Students also take and process the information from the Myers Briggs Type Inventory, the Strong Vocational Interest Inventory, and the COPS Interest Inventory.

The Personal and Career Exploration classes have been taught for at least twenty years at California State University, Long Beach. As many as fourteen sections, with an enrollment cap of sixty students, are available each semester. Data has been gathered citing the effects of the course on graduation rates as well as retention, and has been cited elsewhere, such as "The Effects of College Career Courses on Learner Outputs and Outcomes: Technical Report No. 26" by Folsom and Reardon.

Limited Life Experiences and Career Planning

This study examines self-efficacy beliefs in a college classroom setting, attended by freshman and sophomore students anticipating a course in Personal and Career Exploration. Given that students enter a classroom setting with different levels of career relevant experience, it is likely that they will have varying levels of self-efficacy as well. It is hypothesized that self-efficacy would be positively affected by 1) normalizing limited life experiences through a prescribed feedback intervention that reinforced the past events as a "frame of reference," 2) identifying careers for exploration using basic, functional transferable skills used in part time and volunteer work, and 3) introduce a method for students to record their anticipated and actual grades on each of the class assignments. The rationale for this intervention is to encourage students to acknowledge their limited past performance as worthy of recognition and attributable to future goals.

Background Information on Self-Efficacy

Bandura (l986) describes perceived self-efficacy as the belief that one can execute behavior to produce outcomes. He believes that people with strong beliefs in their self –efficacy set challenging goals and sustain strong commitment to their goals, whereas people with weak beliefs in self-efficacy shy away from difficult tasks and have low aspirations and weak commitments to their goals. Luzzo and McWhirter (2001) believe that few researchers have examined the role that perceived barriers play in the career decision-making process, yet current research suggests that college students perceive a number of barriers to educational and goal attainment. Brown and Lent (1996) suggested that perceived career-related barriers inhibit translating interests into career goals and goals into actions. "Even persons with well-developed and differentiated interests in a particular career path will be unlikely to pursue that path if they perceive (accurately or inaccurately) substantial barriers to entering or advancing in that career"(Brown and Lent, 1996, pp. 355-356).

Bandura (1997) identified four major categories of experiences that determine efficacy beliefs, which are mediated by how a person cognitively evaluates information. When individuals are unfamiliar with the demands of a given task or activity, they are likely to call on the self-efficacy beliefs that have been developed as a result of previous experiences with similar tasks. Consequently, how a person behaves is influenced by self-perceptions of their capabilities, which help determine what a person will do with the knowledge and the skills they have. In this present study, the context of limited life experiences is suggested to be a perceived barrier to the recognition of *possible selves* in career planning. Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming (Markus, 1986).

If self-efficacy and self-esteem are central to the sustained success of individuals, then career related accomplishments could be experiences that build confidence and boost the sense of positive outcome expectations. However, most 17 to 20 year olds have limited job experiences and generally those experiences are not in highly skilled occupations. Therefore, a critical piece of the goal setting process for this age group is that they frame their limited experience in such a way that they receive positive feedback that suggests the experiences they have had are worthy of future career related recognition. Through self-assessment, students may be better able to understand how their evaluation of interests, skills, personality and values will influence their selection of future career options. Students who lack career decision-making self-efficacy may avoid exploration activities, give up easily, and essentially fail to reach their full career related potential.

Research Assertion

Based on these suppositions, the researchers anticipated that the participants in the experimental groups that were exposed to a model of normalization of limited life experiences and reinforced with constructive feedback would intensify their goal setting and gain a higher degree of goal attainment than the control group. Goal attainment would be indicated by satisfaction with selection of a college major. The researchers also hypothesized that the experimental participants would increase their knowledge of the basic functional transferable skills that occupations require, and that would lead to an increase in satisfaction of selection of a career goal.

Procedure

Two classes would use the constructive feedback and skills analysis intervention and two other classes would not specifically use this approach. A pre and posttest of career choice self-efficacy would be given to all four classes. During the first week of class, the students would be briefed on the general nature of the study. The students will be informed that participation is voluntary and assured that their responses to the questionnaires would remain confidential and would not have any effect upon their grade in the class. Participants would provide measures of demographics (sex, age, prior work experience) and a measure of career choice self-efficacy as a control variable.

Triad Intervention Exercise

In the second week of class, students will participate in a group exercise that offers a structured experience in which feedback about their paid or unpaid work and volunteer experiences could be identified as viable experiences related to future career planning. The directions for this exercise will be scripted to insure uniformity. The students will be divided into groups of three, and each student reports on three to five events, accomplishments and/or experiences they recall with pride and satisfaction. One person acts as the listener and is asked to offer acknowledgement and help the speaker identify skills and attributes that contributed to their success. The other person records what skills and abilities were highlighted in the discussion about these past events, using a list of 72 basic, functional, transferable skills from the EUREKA MicroSkills Inventory.

EUREKA Micro Skills Assessment

Following the triad intervention report, the students are asked to transfer their achievements or accomplishment onto the EUREKA MicroSkills Worksheet Form R. [1] Following the directions on the worksheets, the students check off whether they used any of the 72 basic, functional, transferable skills on the worksheet, and in the final column, whether they wished to use these skills in their future work. Then the students prioritize these skills into the five Very Satisfying Skills, the 10 Moderately Satisfying Skills, and the 20 Somewhat Satisfying Skills. The students visit the university's Career Development Center and input their responses into the EUREKA MicroSkills program. Each student has a detailed set of instructions on how to complete this assignment, including the content of and the number of pages of printouts that they are required to bring back to class as well as a due date. The resulting list of occupations from MicroSkills are interpreted as a match between the skills selected by the student, and the skills that are necessary for that occupation. A further step in the interpretation is the comparison of the skills the students selected, and three occupations of initial interest to the students. A class discussion will ensue as to the educational and work experience goals that students will need to set in order to achieve the occupational goals.

The researchers will tabulate a list of the occupations that students were interested in before assessing their skills, and the number of matches between the initial three occupations and the results from the MicroSkills feedback. By participating in this exercise the students are exposed early in the course to potential occupations and potential college majors. Instead of thinking about a five-year plan, the emphasis is of goal setting using self-concept information and career choice.

Record Keeping for Feedback

To boost the appraisal of self-ratings for students, the instructor in the experimental group will ask the students to predict the grade they expected from each assignment and record the actual grade achieved. The feedback sheet procedure will be part of each class agenda. While this strategy may not necessarily boost perceived self-efficacy, it is noted that when people estimate their capabilities accurately, it can be of considerable value in successful functioning (Bandura,

[1] © EUREKA, the California Career Information System.

1997). The record keeping is a method to reduce the ambiguity expressed by students of the class assignments and help students focus on their goals by monitoring their own performance in relation to the assigned tasks. Because there are a large number of assignments in this course with varying degrees of assigned points, the researchers want to integrate the concepts of locus of control and locus of responsibility as a feedback component.

Conclusion

The purpose of this investigation is to explore the implications of self-efficacy beliefs on the career planning process among emerging adults in the 17-20 age bracket who have had limited life experiences. An objective for the coursework in personal and career exploration is to expose students, new to the college experience, to methods for identifying and achieving successful academic and career goals. Throughout such courses, numerous tasks and exercises expect identification with self and future self-schemas. By improving the methodology of validating life experiences, the researchers are attempting to show that self-efficacy can be positively influenced, leading to a boost in self-efficacy that can contribute to improved goal setting and goal attainment.

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